Oral History of Fern Louise Boswell Hobson's WWII Years

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The advent of 1941 saw the United States with the first glimmers of hope in a little over a decade. The October 29, 1929, "Black Tuesday" stock market crash coupled with drought in the plains states during the 1930's had plunged the nation into the depths of economic and psychological depression. Known as the "Great Depression," this period saw two things the United States had never experienced before: First, the vast, rich nation was hungry. Second, for the first time, the peoples of the United States migrated from necessity, for survival, instead of an expansion of their horizons. By 1941, rainfalls in most areas of the United States were back to normal. The Great Depression was drawing to a close.

Fern Louise Boswell Hobson, Louise (as she prefers to be called), was born in Wheatland, Wyoming, on March 8, 1920, during the worst snowstorm ever recorded in Wheatland for that date. Wheatland is the county seat of Platte County, Wyoming. The population at the time of Louise's birth was 1,000 (today it is only 3,500).

On a warm spring evening in 1938, Louise met her future husband at a community dance. On January 27, 1939, Louise became Mrs. Wendell Phillip Hobson Jr. During the Depression years, work was scarce and had to be chase; Wendell and Louise chased work all of the way to Wenatchee, Washington. In September 1941, they purchased a tiny seventeen-foot mobile home. It was a home of their very own, a home on wheels for this constantly moving family, December 1941, found Wendell and Louise in Scottsbluff, Nebraska. They had purchased their first radio, and made a solemn pact that they would not turn the radio on until Wendell had built a shelf for it. On December 7, 1941, the radio was installed on its brand new shelf and turned on. The first thing they heard was the static screech of an un-tuned radio. Wendell turned the dial seeking a station - and then: "**The Japanese have BOMBED Pearl Harbor**," blared over the speaker. "**Five United States Battle Ships Have Been Sunk**." Wendell and Louise looked at each other in utter consternation. On December 7, 1941, the war in Europe exploded into a World War, World War II.

I suppose that we were lucky during the Second World War. Wendell's first impulse was to enlist in the army. When the recruiting officer asked him what kind of civilian work he did or could do, the reply of, "Construction and heavy equipment operator," lost him all chance of the army wanting him; he didn't get rejected because of his flat feet, or because of our two babies, or because he was twenty-five-years old. He was rejected because his construction skills were more valuable to the war effort right here at home. I

was relieved.

The war didn't change our lives much. We still had the tires of the car and trailer singing "On The Road Again," but we didn't have to worry where our next job would be. For the first time in our married life, we didn't have to worry about money. Wendell always made considerably more than the twenty-five cents per hour minimum wage. The first place we were sent was Pueblo, Colorado. Actually, that's where Wendell left the children and me. He went north 38 miles to Fort Carson, actually there wasn't a fort there yet. That's why Wendell went. He and one thousand other men moved in, set up tents, and began to build. Two weeks later Fort Carson was a reality; barracks, parade grounds, officer's quarters, rifle ranges, and ground for field maneuvers and training exercises. I only got to see it once, in February of 1942, and although I knew that it had been built in just two weeks, it was hard to believe that anything so massive and so permanent could have been constructed so quickly. It was something I would become accustomed to.

From there Wendell went to Trinidad and then Granada to build "army" bases. We later heard that these weren't army bases at all, but internment camps for the Germans and the damned J. . .'s. November 1942 found us in Clearfield, Utah. I remember that Wendover and Hill were two of the air force ranges, bases as they're called today, where Wendell worked in Utah. Wendell was always one of the first to arrive and last to leave a job site because he did the cat work and grader work to prepare the ground and make roads as well as erecting buildings.

Five men from my family were stationed in some part of the world as a part of the war effort by the end of the war:

1941 - My older brother, Earle, twenty-four, was in the Army before the outbreak of the War in the Pacific and it was a constant worry that he would be sent out. Earle stayed at a desk stateside throughout the war.

1942 - Wendell's brother, Warren, twenty-two, joined the Marines and was sent to the Philippines. Old man Hobson was a Quaker who didn't believe in war; he tried to get Warren released from the Marines as necessary to the home war effort. Farmers had been frozen to their jobs, but Warren hadn't been working on the farm before the war and old man Hobson didn't get his way. I wish he would have. Some J. . .s in a cave on Guadalcanal, who didn't know the war was over, killed Warren, three days after the end of the war.

1942 - My younger brother, Harry, nineteen, was drafted and sent to Italy, despite the fact that his young wife was pregnant with their first child – from Italy he was sent to North Africa—he had life time nightmares about the war.

In 1944 my brother-in-law, "Red", twenty, joined the Navy because he did not want to serve in the Army. He was unaware that my sister, Virginia, was pregnant with their first child. Red never got further than 500 miles from the Eastern Seaboard.

On May 21, 1944, three days after our son, Phil, was born, my husband, Wendell, left for the Army. I hadn't realized that he thought the only real use he could be to the war effort was to kill or become gun fodder himself.

Our service men all wrote regularly. I think it was the only way they had to feel close to home and the ones they loved and who loved them. Harry wrote to me often, he was so lonesome and afraid, and Warren wrote me from somewhere in the Pacific, we never knew exactly where the boys were. By the time the censors got through with the letters there was a lot that was either blacked out or cut out. Warren had a devil-may-care attitude, a happy-go-lucky personality. From the little we could decipher of his letters, it was as if he was having a great adventure. It always seemed so long between letters, but sometimes I would get five or ten letters in a batch. Then I knew they were alive, but it was such a long wait for the next letters.

During 1942, 1943, and 1944, because of Wendell's work for the government, we didn't have to worry about the rationing of gas, oil, and tires. Being necessary to the war effort had its perks. Nevertheless, driving at night on strange roads to get to the next job by morning with just tiny slits for the headlights to shine through the blackout shields was scary. Rationing was odd: sugar, meat, and coffee were rationed. We had ration cards for shoes and clothing, but for someone who had grown up during the Depression, being able to buy two pairs of shoes per person per year was luxury. The same was true of clothing. With our boys dying overseas, living in wet, cold, muddy foxholes, or roasting in the desert during the day and freezing at night, swatting bugs in the jungle, and eating cold food out of tins, it seemed that we lived in immoral riches. The black market where you could buy "anything for a price" was positively sinful.

Wendell and I arrived in Portland, Oregon in the summer of 1943. The shipyards were working twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and desperately needed men. Wendell went to work as a welder. He worked ten or more hours a day, six to seven days a week. Although I spent almost as much time alone as I had when we were on the road, I wasn't as lonely in Portland as I had been. I had family there and Wendell was home for a part of every night or day. Hanging blackout curtains up at night seemed like a game until we would have one of the air raid drills. Then the game wasn't funny anymore. Portland and every other town or city in the United States was dark at night; streetlights were not on during the entire war.

As I said earlier, on May 20, 1944, Wendell shocked me by telling me that he had joined the Army; he left the next morning. He had sold our little trailer while I was in the hospital and gotten a furnished apartment for the children and myself. He gave me the money from the sale of our little "home on wheels" so that I could live until his army pay started to come in.

I was so lonely, confused, and blue that when my sister, Virginia, asked me to go with her to Rhode Island to see her husband, Red, before he shipped out, I grabbed at it like a drowning man grasping at straws. We stopped for two weeks in Wheatland and I left my three babies with my parents. Virginia and I joined a photography crew that was going east selling door-to-door in-home photographs. We earned some money and got free transportation as far as Cleveland, Ohio. From there, we went on to Rhode Island by train. The train was wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling service men, but they always gave us seats. I found work as a soda jerk in Rhode Island. I won't pretend that I didn't have fun. We were young in a young world and we were living with some desperation, kind of like, live while you can.

Virginia had her baby, Sandy, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in January of 1945. In February, I started back to Wheatland by train. I had been gone six months. Wendell surprised me when he met my train in Cheyenne, Wyoming. Old man Hobson had succeeded in getting one of his sons out of the war. The old man had pleaded with the army for a "hardship discharge" because I had "abandoned" his son's children. The war years were a crazy time.

Wendell and I returned to Portland, Oregon, and he went back to work in the shipyards.

In August of 1945 when we heard that we had dropped the A-bomb on Hiroshima, we were glad. We were jubilant, "Serves the little yellow bastards right!" We danced in the streets. We didn't think of the thousands of J. . .s who had been killed in an instant, not until later. We didn't think of it until months and years later, when our own boys finally got home. Then, all we thought was that it had ended the war. Today, I don't know what to think.

Fern Louise Boswell Hobson is my mother. We did this interview between January and March 2000 as a part of the 105-page single spaced book I wrote of her life for her eightieth birthday. She died December 9, 2000.